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Self-reported Stressors of College Freshmen

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University of Montevallo

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Abstract

Research has indicated that the freshman year of college is the most stressful one for the student. This study is based on the belief that a thorough comprehension of self-reported stressors of college freshmen is necessary for administrators to plan programs designed to help students to cope with their stressors. Effective coping reduces attrition and promotes better motivated college students. The current study was conducted using qualitative methodology. All college freshmen (N=439) at a small public university in Alabama, enrolled in a required freshman orientation course in the Fall term of 1987, were asked to list and describe their five most severe stressors. They were also asked to rank order the stressors by severity. These qualitative data were analyzed, and thirteen categories of students' stressors emerged. The most frequently reported stressor category was Academic Concerns, followed by Friendship and Campus Life, Finances, and Time Management. Results indicated that there were no appreciable differences in reported stressors between males and females. Knowledge of these self-reported stressors should enable the administrators of this university to tailor programs designed to respond to the specific needs of its students.

College presents a time of growth and developmental change for the college student. Some of these changes create negative stress for the student and may affect such things as the student's health (Martin, Garrity & Bowers, 1975), cumulative grade point average (Pervin, 1967; Spielberger & Weitz, 1964), and dropping out of college (Houston, 1971; Sexton, 1965). Since the freshman year is more stressful for the average college student than the three remaining years (Houston, 1971; Ottoson, 1968; Palladino & Tryon, 1978), it seems reasonable to assess the self-reported stressors of incoming freshmen so that effective program planning may result. Warner (1975) cautioned that too often counseling programs are set up to serve the perceived needs of the institution, as dictated by budget, staff qualifications, etc., rather than to serve the real needs of the student body as reported by the students themselves. Merrill, Oetting, and Hurst (1974) have stated that there is a "... critical need for a systematic assessment of institutional and individual needs in order to plan appropriate and effective interventions, and this must be followed by systematic evaluation of the effects of whatever programs are developed" (p. 358).

The University of Montevallo is currently instituting a new core curriculum which emphasizes a holistic approach to student development in a liberal arts educational setting. This curriculum recognizes the importance of considering the individual as a whole with both academic and personal development of the student as the educational goal. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary

for the faculty, administration, and staff to understand what the freshmen perceive as the major stressors in their college experience, and to use this information to help these students to cope with both the positive and negative stressors of the college environment.

Method

Subjects

All the students enrolled in a required freshman and transfer student orientation course at the University of Montevallo, a small Southern liberal arts university, during the Fall of 1987 were selected to participate in this study. Demographic data collected at the time of the survey indicated that there were 288 (65.6%) females and 151 (34.4%) males represented in the sample of 439 subjects. The ages of the subjects were 341 (77.7%) in the 17-18 range; 87 (19.8%) in the 19-24 range; and 11 (2.5%) over age 25. There were 427 (97.3%) freshmen, and the remaining 12 (2.8%) were sophomores or juniors. Since the number of sophomores and juniors was so small, their results were included in this study.

Procedure

There are several ways to assess the stressors of students. Instruments such as the Mooney Problem Checklist (Mooney, 1950), the College Student Goals Inventory (Gill, 1977), the Freshman Issues and Concerns Survey (Sagaria & White, 1977) and several others are available. However, each of these was developed for a particular college, university, or group, and is not necessarily

representative of what students at the University of Montevallo would find appropriate for themselves. Therefore, in beginning the task of assessment of self-reported stressors of freshmen at the University of Montevallo, it was decided to obtain the data in a qualitative, open-ended way, so as not to prejudice the students' reports of their stressors. Blaise (1986) in his study of teacher stress felt that ". . .highly structured survey instruments . . . may excessively control the research subject's responses so that they do not accurately reflect the subject's perception" (p. 147). Blaise also states that rarely are open-ended methods used in research, even though they allow the subject to express in detail his or her views.

In the current study, each subject was given a plain sheet of notebook paper and a pencil and asked to list and describe five major stressors currently affecting him/her and to rank these stressors according to their perceived severity (Rank 1 being the most severe and Rank 5 being the least severe). The demographic data reported above were also collected.

Although using open-ended questions provided the freedom of response that the authors desired, there were some problems in analyzing the data into emergent categories. For example, some students listed five academic stressors (i. e., homework, tests, class assignments, instructor problems, and problems within specific courses). These, when analyzed, would be classified as only one stressor - Academic Concerns in Rank 1. No stressors

would appear for that student in Ranks 2, 3, 4, or 5. The open-ended-question format also allowed for a certain number of unusual responses (i. e., nuclear war, world hunger, AIDS) which defied easy classification.

Results

The focus of this study was to determine from self-reports what the freshmen at the University of Montevallo perceive as their stressors. Table 1 shows the thirteen categories of stressors that emerged from analysis of the data collected from the sample of 439 freshmen and their placement in Ranks 1, 2, and 3 according to their perceived severity. Since there were 155 and 313 of the subjects who did not place a stressor in Ranks 4 and 5, respectively, Table 1 includes only stressors reported in Ranks 1, 2 and 3.

Academic Concerns was listed as the most commonly expressed stressor in both the first and second stressor ranks with 152 responses in Rank 1 and 117 responses in Rank 2. It was replaced as the most commonly reported stressor in Rank 3 by the category of Friendship and Campus Life with 61 responses.

Other stressor categories appearing in Ranks 1, 2 and 3 in similar numbers were Time Management with 49 responses, 42 responses, and 36 responses in these categories, respectively. The category Miscellaneous Personal Concerns also was reported equally among Ranks 1, 2, and 3 with 42, 37, and 37 responses.

respectively. The category of Finances appeared as a significant stressor only in Rank 2 with 55 responses.

Other stressors reported by students which show similarity in ranking according to severity include Dating Relationships, Dependence/Independence, Home Problems, Concerns with the Future, Employment, and Social Pressure. Two categories, Self-Concept/Self-Esteem and Religious Concerns, were reported by a small number of the freshmen across Ranks 1, 2 and 3 almost equally.

The data analysis indicated that both males and females reported Academic Concerns as their major stressor. Table 2 data indicate that there are other stressor categories which differed somewhat in presence and perceived severity for males and females. Even though the differences were small, females reported Time Management, Home Problems and Dependence/Independence, and Dating Relationships more frequently than males did. Males reported Finances, Employment, Friendship & Campus Life, and Social Pressure more frequently than females did.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the freshmen at the University of Montevallo experience and report more stress surrounding their academic performance than any other aspect of their college life. This finding is in accordance with past studies (Sagaria, Higginson, & White, 1980; Palladino & Tryon, 1978). The kinds of concerns that these freshmen listed within this

category included a concern for good grades, test anxiety, dealing with the expectations of college instructors, getting the best possible schedule of classes, and homework. Understandably, since these concerns have to do with "survival of the fittest" within the college environment, it is not surprising that they occupy so much of the student's time and energy.

Other concerns also dominate the freshmen students' time and resources. In fact, one of the most commonly expressed stressors is Time Management with students making remarks about how they have to learn to budget their time in order to get all of the expected work completed. This area would perhaps be linked with the area of Home Problems and Dependence/Independence in that, for many of these freshmen, this is the first time that they have had the primary responsibility for taking care of themselves and scheduling their own time.

A related area of expressed concerns is Friendship & Campus Life. Here the students have to deal not only with the task of meeting and getting along with many new people, including their roommates, but they also are faced with the reality of losing or being separated from their old friends, having to eat institutional food instead of home-cooked food, and having to put up with an increased loss of privacy. This time of growth and change can be both exciting and frightening for freshmen. Dating Relationships often are in a state of flux during this time, and are therefore seen as stressful. Several students expressed sadness over being

separated from their boyfriend/girlfriend or not being able to get a date. Social Pressure dealing with sorority or fraternity pressure, the pressure to use alcoholic beverages, or to "party" instead of to study was mentioned by approximately 10 percent of the sample. This finding would indicate that the freshmen at the University of Montevallo are, perhaps, not as concerned with social pressure as freshmen from other colleges and universities.

A third constellation of stressors includes Employment and Finances. With the ever-rising costs of tuition, books, housing, and board, many students are employed both on and off campus. The number of hours that they must devote to work interferes with the time that they can give to academic concerns. Yet, many of them state that they cannot attend college without working. A frequently voiced financial concern was losing a scholarship because of inadequate grades. Since this concern was expressed more in financial than in academic terms, it was included in the category of Finances.

A category which contained an assortment of reported stressors was labeled Miscellaneous Personal Concerns. Some of the problems mentioned in this category include transportation and on-campus parking, physical injury and illness, homesickness, fatigue and lack of sleep, and the fear of speaking before groups. Because of the diversity of responses, this category appears as the third most commonly reported stressor in Rank 1.

As has been reported in an earlier study (Sagaria, Higginson, & White, 1980), the differences in reported stressors between males and females are negligible. Both males and females share common concerns as college freshmen.

The purpose of this study is to provide the University of Montevallo with useful information which may assist the faculty, administration, and staff in creating programs and counseling services to help students deal with their reported stressors more effectively. Future research plans include replication of these results and using the obtained categories of identified stressors to construct a questionnaire which may be given to incoming freshmen and outgoing seniors in a before and after fashion. This questionnaire would help target incoming freshmen who need student development services to aid them in coping with stress, and would also be helpful as a measure of outcomes of these programs at the end of the students' college years.

Table 1

Categories of self-reported stressors of freshmen

by rank of perceived severity

	Rank					
	1st		2nd		3rd	
Stressor	n	%	n	%	n	%
Academic Concerns	152	34.6	117	26.7	51	11.6
Finances	32	7.3	55	12.5	37	8.4
Dating Relationships	27	6.2	28	6.4	40	9.1
Friendship & Campus Life	22	5.0	55	12.5	61	13.9
Social Pressure	12	2.7	14	3.2	19	4.3
Time Management	49	11.2	42	9.6	36	8.2
Home Problems	22	5.2	18	4.1	13	3.0
Dependence/Independence	24	5.5	30	6.8	33	7.5
Concerns with Future	22	5.0	16	3.6	14	3.2
Employment	20	4.6	7	1.6	19	4.3
Self-concept/Self-esteem	9	2.1	8	1.8	11	2.5
Religious Concerns	6	1.4	3	.7	2	.5
Miscellaneous Personal Concerns	42	9.6	37	8.4	37	8.4

N = 432

Table 2

Sex differences in stressors and their perceived severity

	Female (N=288)		Male (N=151)	
	n	%	n	%
Stressor 1				
Academics	97	33.7	55	36.4
Finances	18	6.3	14	9.3
Home Problems	18	6.3	4	2.6
Dependence/Independence	19	6.6	5	3.3
Employment	10	3.5	10	6.6
Stressor 2				
Academics	76	26.4	41	27.2
Friendship & Campus Life	32	11.1	23	15.2
Time Management	32	11.1	10	6.6
Home Problems	14	4.9	4	2.6
Dependence/Independence	23	8.0	7	4.6
Stressor 3				
Friendship & Campus Life	41	14.2	20	13.2
Dating Relationships	30	10.4	10	6.6
Social Pressure	10	3.5	9	5.9

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Appendix A

Sample Responses for Each Stresser Category

Academic Concerns

"Exam tests make me stressed out bad. I worry that I [illegible] Tests always seem to like me together on the same day. [illegible] keep my grades and attend up to par."

Finances

"[illegible] having $, working on weekends to [illegible] the semester. [illegible] $. My scholarship requires a certain grade [illegible]."

[illegible] Problems

"[illegible] time for my boyfriend and worrying about our problems."

"[illegible] not getting dates."

"[illegible] from boyfriend - I cannot communicate face to face [illegible] best friend. Although I do have quite a few friends at UH, [illegible] at times without my companion."

"Women - decisions...decisions...decisions."

Friendship and Campus Life

"My dorm roommate is a slob, smells bad, and always borrows things without returning them."

"Meeting new people and starting new friendships is difficult."

Social Pressure

"Sometimes, there is a stress to conform to how we 'should be' and I have always gone slightly against the grain."

"Peer pressure. I am sometimes pressured to do things by my friends but thank goodness I have friends that understand what the word 'no' means."

"Sorority - Trying to be a great pledge and finding time to participate."

Time Management

"Time - I just don't seem to have enough."

"Between going to classes, working a job (on-campus), studying and participating in a sorority, I find I feel 'stressed out' or drained because there seems not enough time in the day to do what I need to."

Home Problems

"I worry about my parents while I'm away. I feel guilty for all the expenses they're having to pay for me."

"My step-dad...beats up my mom - alcoholic - disowned me."

"Parents expect me to be perfect."

Dependence/Independence

"College life - to be able to handle in an 'adult' manner."

"Living away from home - it costs me way too much and I miss home much more than expected."

"I feel that I should be able to do whatever I want but that's not the case since I'm at home."

"Life - I am an adult now. I have all these new responsibilities. I am in complete control of what I do and don't

do. There are many things that I must do now that I've never worried about before."

Concerns with Future

"Death - I don't think much about my own death, but lately I seem to be somewhat preoccupied with the fear of losing close loved ones."

"Nuclear war - I am very afraid of this."

"Can't decide what to major in - scared to make a commitment in one - I do not want to be behind in the one I decide to major in if I ever decide."

Employment

"Job stress - I was laid-off from a part-time job recently and I feel guilty that I do not have a job."

"Job - It's hard to work and go to school at the same time but you have to because you need the money."

Self-confidence/Self-esteem

"I am shy when it comes to meeting new people and am worried what kind of impression I will make."

"Inferiority feelings - I am currently seeing a counselor for this."

"Feeling 'subordinate' to the upperclassmen.

Religious Concerns

"Faith - trying to live intentionally and be a faithful

Christian. Trying to accept people and live life in a straightforward manner."

"Conflict between religion and 'college life' - many students don't worship at all. They would rather 'party' all the time."

Miscellaneous Personal Concerns

"Life without a car - definately a stressor! I cannot go when I want to and if I need a ride, I have to depend on others for transportation. This is humiliating to an independent person!"

"Sickness - this place seems to breed viruses. (This is probably caused by stress in the first place.) but I don't enjoy being sick."

"I sometimes feel I want to go home and never come back to school."

"Lack of sleep. I sometimes go out with my friends and stay out late, causing me to be drowsy and sometimes irritable the next day."